DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 088 CS 012 401

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TITLE Student-Posed Questions for Literature-Based Discussion.
INSTITUTION New Mexico Univ., Albuquerque. Dept. of Psychology.; Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment (OERI/ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-16-042673-1; SAI-96-3015
PUB DATE 96
CONTRACT 117A20007
NOTE 6p.; Supersedes ED 377 469.
AVAILABLE FROM U.S. Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, Mail Stop: SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-9328.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Cooperative Learning; Elementary Education; *Questioning Techniques; Student Centered Curriculum; Student Motivation; *Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS Questions

ABSTRACT

The ideas in this mini-brochure are intended for teachers interested in creating opportunities for students to pose questions during literature-based discussions. The brochure suggests that a child-centered approach to questioning is a highly motivating way to conduct discussions because students of all reading abilities can participate. The brochure discusses developing discussion guidelines, emphasizing that "put-downs" are unacceptable, orienting before reading, soliciting questions after reading, accepting all questions, encouraging collaboration, shifting to peer discussion groups, and learning from students' questions. (RS)

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Student-Posed Questions for Literature-Based Discussion

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"I think we pay more attention to the story when we get to make up the questions" - Julie

"You can't learn unless you ask questions"
- Wendell

These comments were made by second-grade students after participating in a year-long project during which they assumed responsibility for providing the questions for storybook discussions.

The ideas in this brochure are for teachers interested in creating opportunities for students to pose questions during literature-based discussions. This approach to questioning works well with heterogeneous whole group and peer-only discussions. It is a highly motivating way to conduct discussions because students of all reading abilities can participate and teachers become increasingly fascinated by their students' questions and responses. It requires no pre-planning or special materials; all that is needed is an interesting story, a teacher willing to listen, and time for students to talk.

Rationale

Putting students of all ages in charge of posing discussion questions represents a significant departure from the tradition of teacher questioning in the teaching of reading. Questions generated by teachers or those found in commercial reading materials have long been employed as the primary means of developing students' comprehension, interpretation, and critical thinking abilities. In that tradition, students are asked to think about their reading based on someone else's understanding of what is important. Thus, students are denied control over question-posing, an essential ingredient in the process of learning. When teachers give students opportunities to pose questions, students assume more responsibility for: (a) determining what needs to be understood and (b) directing their own learning processes. As they are learning to read, it is important for students to explore what they find curious, confusing, interesting, or important in storybooks. Students will become actively engaged in text comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation when they discuss with classmates and teachers their questions about issues that are either directly or tangentially related to the story. This child-centered approach to questioning is significantly different from training students to ask certain kinds of comprehension monitoring questions. The emphasis in this brochure is on allowing students to discuss any question that naturally arises in response to reading or listening to stories.

Developing Discussion Guidelines

It is helpful for the teacher and students to create a short list of discussion guidelines that will help define the kind of discourse everyone wants to have about a shared reading experience. We used the following guidelines:

- Think of questions as you listen or read.
- Listen carefully to other students' questions, opinions, and reasons.
- Respect everyone's question and everyone's response.
- Agree or disagree, but give reasons to support your opinion.

No Put-Downs

The discussion guidelines are most effective when introduced in classrooms where students feel safe. Georgiana Sumner explains, making her classroom safe means "no put-downs."

Sumner: I don't feel I can get anywhere with students until we create an atmosphere in the classroom that supports risk-taking. Children need to feel that no one is going to say, "why did you ask that question? " There should be no put-downs from me, from the aide, or from the children. At the beginning of the school year we talk about how we're going to treat each other. Not only will I treat them respectfully, but they will treat me and each other that way too.

Sometimes, following a discussion session, the teacher and students talked about how the discussion went that day.

Sumner: I heard a put-down which I was surprised to hear. This put-down was not so much the words but the tone of voice used. Carl, how did it make you feel when others acted like your answer was silly?

Carl: Bad

Sumner: And you didn't say anything else during discussion time. Carl was making a very good point and it was put down, which meant he never said another word. He wasn't going to chance another put-down.

Put-downs were rare in the storybook discussions and in other class settings. The emphasis on the unacceptability of ridicule and sarcasm early in the school year had become an integral part of this classroom's culture. Throughout the year students responded positively to reminders that their words or actions may have hurt someone's feelings.

Orienting Before Reading

Before reading to students or having them read to themselves, let them know that they should be thinking of questions they would like to discuss. There are many ways of communicating this to students.

Sumner: The story I'm going to read to you today is one I read for the first time the other day. As I read it to myself, I started thinking of questions. I either got answers to the questions along the way, or I had more questions. While I read this story to you today, I want you to think about questions you want to talk about. The title of this story is The Black Snowman and it was written by Phil Mendez and illustrated by Carole Byard.

Soliciting Questions After Reading

After reading The Black Snowman, Sumner began the question posing in this way:

Just for a minute, I want you to take a deep breath. Close your eyes. Think about this story. Think about the things that happened. See if you can let some questions form in your head. (wait time) Anybody have a question they want to ask?

Students can either write their questions independently or give them orally for the teacher to record. Before beginning the discussion, it is important to display the questions so everyone can read and refer to them (e.g., write on chart paper, chalkboard, or sentence strips).

Accepting All Questions

It is important to accept all students' questions. The teacher should not evaluate the worth or appropriateness of students' questions. Every question is about something that needs to be discussed and understood from that child's point of view.

To illustrate the importance of encouraging collaboration and valuing all questions, we draw upon questions that students posed about The Seal Mother by Mordicai Gerstein. The story is based on a Scottish folktale about a fisherman who falls in love with a selkie--a beautiful woman who lives in the sea as a seal. He hides her sealskin and promises to return it to her in seven years if she will marry him. She acquiesces and they soon have a son who eventually helps his mother get her sealskin and return to the sea.

Keisha's question about The Seal Mother was, "Why did the mother sleep in the kitchen?" At first, this question seemed trivial, but we came to appreciate that for Keisha it was important to understand the circumstances that led the mother to sleep in the kitchen. The mother was angry because the fisherman had reneged on a promise to return her sealskin. This detail question led to exploring important aspects of the plot and characterization. This is one reason why we are emphatic about valuing all the questions posed by students regardless of our initial opinion of them.

Most of the students' questions were about matters that called for a combination of text-based and knowledge-based inferential thinking. Sometimes their questions mirrored our teacher-like questions: (a) Why didn't the husband let the mother have her sealskin back? (b) Why did the boy give his mother the sealskin? (c) Why did the mother take the boy with her into the ocean? Other questions focused on what the students find intriguing: (a) When the seals were dancing and laughing, was the mother there with her boy? (b) Why doesn't the mother give her sealskin to her son? (c) How come the boy had to go home?

Encouraging Collaboration

Victor: Why didn't the husband let her have her skin back?
Carl: Good question, Victor.
Commeyras: Okay. (repeating while writing) Why didn't the husband let...
Ashley: her get her skin back?
Students: (reading from chart) Why didn't the husband let her have her skin back?
Ashley: I think we need to put "seal skin?"

Commeyras: What do you think Victor?
Victor: Seal skin (nodding in agreement).
Commeyras: Okay, I'll insert "seal skin."

This exchange about The Seal Mother illustrates how second-grade students supported one another while posing questions and how they helped each other consider ways of making the meaning of questions clearer. Students sometimes have difficulty articulating their questions and through collaboration with classmates and the teacher, they become more adept.

Shifting to Peer Discussion Groups

After students had experienced ten whole class discussions that revolved around their questions, they wanted to have peer-only discussion groups.

1) The whole class listened to a storybook in a circle around the teacher.
2) Students went to their desks and wrote the questions they wanted to discuss.
3) Students met in groups of five and discussed their questions for approximately 20 minutes. They took turns being discussion leader. A copy of the storybook was available in each group for reference.
4) They returned to a whole class meeting so that each group could report on the question that yielded the most talk. More discussion occurred as students shared the ideas that had been explored in their peer groups.

Students remarked on their participation in peer discussion groups:

Albert: When you're in a big group, everybody goes, and it takes longer for the teacher to call on you. When you're in the little group, there are fewer people, so it takes less time.

Lisa: When the teacher is not there, then you have to give information yourself. So you can learn more.

Billie: In small groups we can get everybody to answer our questions.

Victor: I like writing down the questions because you can get many ideas.

Learning from Students' Questions

Teachers can learn many important things about students' thinking and reading by studying the questions they ask and their discussion of those questions. After hearing Eve Bunting's The Wednesday Surprise, a student posed this question for discussion:

Morris: Why did grandpa not go to the party?

In this story, a grandmother learns to read from her granddaughter. There is no grandfather. Morris's question did not make sense to us until it was discussed. We learned that Morris had inferred from an illustration that the man sitting next to the grandmother at a bus stop was her husband. We also learned that Victor, another student, inferred that the grandfather was on his way to work, explaining why he was not at the birthday party. Morris's question is one we would never have asked as teachers. We would not have learned how Morris and Victor were using inference and illustrations to construct meaning.

Funding for this project was provided by the National Reading Research Center of the University of Georgia and University of Maryland, which is supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program (PR/AWARD No. 117A20007) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Additional funding was provided by an Elva Knight Research Grant from the International Reading Association. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the National Reading Research Center, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the U.S. Department of Education, or the International Reading Association.

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Superintendent of Documents, Mail Stop: SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-9328
ISBN 0-16-042673-1

ISBN 0-16-042673-1
90000
9 780160 426735